

# The Four Evolutionary Stages of Religion

## The Four Evolutionary Stages of Religion

By Venerable [Madewela Punnaji](#)

from the Foreword to [Buddha's Lists](#)

In this book, Dr. [David N. Snyder](#), writes on the scientific nature of the Buddha's teachings and shows us how to proceed in an evolutionary way from ordinary understanding to extra-ordinary understanding into Reality. This book focuses on the many lists of the [Buddha](#) and the author describes their compatibility to scientific method and principles. Dr. Snyder makes it very clear that [Buddhism](#) is not just a dogmatic or mystical religion. He includes a whole chapter on biological evolution and the other chapters keep with this evolutionary theme of going from an ordinary individual to an extra-ordinary Awakened One. In 1987, I had the honor of being invited to deliver a lecture at the University of [Sri Lanka](#), on the evolution of the human being through the practice of religion according to Buddhism. I spoke under the title "Man Superman and Beyond." The talk included the four stages through which religion evolves. At the invitation of Dr. Snyder, I am including some material from that talk in the Foreword to this book.

Superman is not a mere fiction, as it is understood today. Real "Superman" did walk on earth more than twenty five centuries ago. Superman is the result of a process of evolution that took place long time ago. Superman as a species is virtually extinct today, though not entirely. Man evolves in the effort to solve the problem of existence, as in the case of plants and animals. In order to understand this process of evolution, and the problem of existence, it is useful to examine the modern biological theory of evolution.

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## The Biological Perspective

Life, is the characteristic behavior of a substance which was formed out of inanimate matter when the right conditions and the right constituents happened to coincide at some moment in the history of this planet. This substance had the special characteristic of being able to reproduce itself. Although this substance, like any other, had to some day break up and be destroyed, it had the capacity for apparent continuation through continuous replacement. In other words, it attempted to become permanent in an impermanent world, even though this attempt was a failure in reality. This was the original mistake made by living matter. There was no actual living or being; there was only an attempt to live and to be. There was no existence; there was only a struggle for existence. There was no survival either for the fit or for the unfit; there was only an apparent survival. What really continued, ultimately, was only a struggle for existence and the actual survival of nothing.

## Evolution of Civilized Man

The uncivilized man is closer to the apes in that he, like the ape, is for the most part passively reacting to the environment, unable to control his impulses. His life is full of anxiety. He has to find food or he will die of starvation. In going out to find food, he is in danger of becoming the food of another animal. He has to risk his life in order to find food for survival. In the midst of this danger, he also begins to seek pleasure, and in doing so, he often risks his life too in competition with others.

Uncivilized man does not have satisfactory shelter or clothing. He does not have proper medicine when sick. He does not have much security and comfort in life. As a result, uncivilized man experiences a relatively greater amount of anxiety than civilized man. Uncivilized man, because he is not in full control of his natural impulses, is self centered and cannot properly care for others. He is also competitive and alienated and has to satisfy and defend himself, alone, as an individual, even by hurting others. He cannot therefore make much progress in the control of his environment, until he learns to join others and share and care and help one another in society.

When the mind is broadened this way in the process of civilization, man becomes less and less individualistic and more and more co-operative. He becomes more capable of team work. Through cooperative team work, in production and exchange and the discovery of better ways of governing, and organizing, society, civilized man is thus able to reduce the anxiety of life. It should be noted that this anxiety reduction became the primary goal of man, and it was achieved through socialization and self-discipline in civilized man. Self-discipline is both positive and negative. It is to perform what is socially constructive and to avoid what is socially destructive. This social attitude is the characteristic of civilized man. It is individuals that make a society not vice versa. Civilized man is socialized man. Civilized society is his product.

## Evolution of Superman

Although civilized man, through better organization, work and technology, is able to reduce anxiety and make life more comfortable, he is not able to eliminate anxiety from his life entirely. Civilized man, in the process of becoming socialized and disciplined, learns to suppress his natural self-centered urges and impulses. These suppressed impulses begin to accumulate tension, which seeks release in actions. Because this tension is not allowed to be released in actions that are anti social, they tend to find release in perverted form, or this tension remains in the form of anxiety.

This is why civilized society is plagued with neurosis, anxiety, problematic stress and other psychological problems and psychosomatic disease. Civilized man, though he is comfortable physically, is still uncomfortable within. Therefore he seeks inner peace and tranquility. He turns to techniques of stress management, the use of tranquillizer drugs, progressive relaxation, hypnosis, biofeedback and other methods of finding inner peace. He also turns to modern psychotherapy as well as ancient religious techniques of meditation and mysticism.

The important thing about this new turn that civilized man has taken is the focus on inner peace and tranquility. This new turn of civilized man is in the direction of the next stage in the evolution of man. It is the evolution of civilized man to the level of super man.

The more natural and more systematic method of evolution of civilized man to superman, however, is achieved through the practice of religion. By religion, I do not mean mere belief and ritualistic practice. That is what organized religion usually is. I am speaking of natural religion, which is the gradual evolution of consciousness; beginning with the appreciation of what is good and true. This appreciation elevates the human mind above the mere concern with the satisfaction of basic physical needs.

In order to understand the evolution of "civilized man" to the level of "superman" it is useful to examine the evolution of religion. The different religions that we find in the world today are different forms of organized religion. Organized religion does not help individuals to fully evolve because the individuals remain bound to dogmas and rituals, and are not free to evolve. Natural religion is a process of individual evolution. There are four main levels of individual religious evolution. They are:

- 1. The [Saddha](#) level (devotion)
- 2. The [Sila](#) (discipline)
- 3. The [Samadhi](#) (tranquility)
- 4. The [Panna](#) (understanding)

At the saddha level we appreciate what is good and true. This may be expressed in the form of worship of a perfect being who is perfect in goodness and wisdom, whatever be the name one may call Him. Religion is practiced at this level in the form of devotion. It is the devotional level of practice. At this level, man becomes orientated to seek inner perfection. He begins the journey towards civilization.

Religion at the sila level is where one begins to practice the good life, or good principles of behavior, which are socially beneficial. It is at this level that one begins to practice commandments or precepts. This is the level of self-discipline where one begins to control natural emotional impulses and thereby learn to control selfishness. At this level, therefore, we learn to cultivate an interest in others or all beings. It is at this level that civilized man is born. This sila level of religious practice produces civilized man.

The third samadhi level is the level of renunciation and meditation. At this level one gives up all worldly pursuit, sensual pleasures and possessions and takes to meditation. This may also be called the mystic level. Most mystical states described in various religions, fall under this category of practice. In Buddhism this level is called the samadhi level. All the jhanas and samadhis are practiced at this level. At this level one begins to experience inner peace and happiness which is superior to the excitement of sensual pleasures. At this level, one also begins to experience psychic powers by which one's mind has control over matter. Moreover, the senses become more acute, and the brain more efficient at this stage. This is the stage at which man becomes "superman."

The last or the fourth stage of the evolution of religion is what is called the panna level. It is at this level that man becomes fully aware of the problem of existence and its solution. At this level there is direct awareness of experience, instead of existence. It is at this level that man becomes "superhuman" and even loses his identity. This is a stage higher than the level of "superman." It is at this level that man "awakens" from the dream of existence, and ends the process of evolution, by stopping the "struggle for existence." It is the final evolutionary stage, where man becomes immortal, not through eternal life, but through freedom from the delusion of existence. It is the stage of the "Awakened One," the Buddha, the God become.

These four evolutionary levels of religion are levels that every individual has to pass through during the course of human evolution. This evolution is not an unconscious biological evolution but a consciously executed evolution of consciousness itself. Religion seen in this way, is concerned with individuals, rather than organizations or Churches. When an individual evolves from one stage to another the views and lifestyles change. Organized religions tend to prevent such change and therefore obstruct the evolutionary process. Religion that I refer to, and which I call natural religion, is not mere obedience to rules but a conscious process of growth and evolution. It could also be called a growth technique, by means of which an individual consciously evolves from a lower to a higher level of consciousness.

What is special about the "superhuman" evolutionary stage is the superhuman understanding. This is getting in touch with the ground of being. This ground of being is experience, which can be normal or supernormal. The normal experience is anguish and its cause. The supernormal experience is the absence of anguish and the way to its absence. This superhuman understanding has been described by the Buddha in the form of the Four Supernormal Truths.

- 1. The understanding of anguish
- 2. The understanding of the origin of anguish
- 3. The understanding of the cessation of anguish
- 4. The understanding of the way to the cessation of anguish

This fourfold understanding is seen by the [Buddha](#), to be superior to the psychic powers and the states of peace experienced by superman. This is because this understanding results in the solution of the problem of existence, and the ending, of the evolutionary process. It is therefore the ultimate point in the evolution of man. This understanding, however, is not the grasping of a concept but a freedom from all concepts, though it is not an absence of concepts either. It is the direct awareness of experience through introspection. "It is seeing experience with its constituent parts and seeing how the parts of experience arise and cease from moment to moment," in the words of the Buddha.

When we are able to see these components of experience objectively, without identifying with them or personalizing them, we become free of the notion of "self." Then there is nothing to identify as "self" or call "mine" or "myself." Then there is no "self" to be anxious about or try to preserve or satisfy. Then there is no "self" to grow old or die. Then one is free from aging and death. This is immortality. This is the end of all anguish.

The anxiety persisted due to the notion of "self" that resulted from personalization of experience. When this personalization was stopped, the notion of self disappeared and the anxiety ceased. The purpose of this essay has been to point out that superman is not a mere dream or fantasy, but a concrete reality. The evolution of superman from man is not so much a biological process as it is a psychological one. It is the evolution of the human consciousness through introspection. The consciousness becomes gradually conscious of itself, and thereby loses the delusion of existence. It is experiencing experience instead of existence. This freedom from delusion paves the way to vistas of super-knowledge that equips man to become superman.

Today the growing science called quantum physics is gradually making mankind aware of the potentialities of the human mind. Mankind must solve its problems through evolution. Just as a child solves his problems by growing up, and animals solve their problems by evolving, human beings too have to solve their problems through maturity, growth and evolution. Modern society is plagued with problems like crime, drug abuse, poverty, mental sickness, psychosomatic disease, insanity, suicide, war and many more. All these problems seem to be the result of emotional immaturity. Therefore, maturity, growth or evolution seems to be the only solution. If evolution is the solution to our problems, then it is worth our while to learn how to evolve.

Man evolves through the practice of religion. Religion is the process of human evolution. Saddha, or belief in superman, gives hope to mankind. Sila, or self-discipline helps uncivilized man to become socialized and civilized. Samadhi or gaining inner calm helps civilized man reach the state of superman. Panna, or direct awareness of experience, helps "superman" to awaken from the dream of existence, and evolve to the "superhuman" level.

If you have recognized the importance of evolution, and if you have accepted the fact that it is possible for a human being to evolve, and if you have understood the method of conscious evolution, then what is left to be done is nothing but to make the effort to keep evolving.

Once I was traveling by train from Washington DC to New York City. On the way I saw a large poster put up at one station. It contained the picture of a large chimpanzee. Below the picture was, a line that read: "Keep Evolving."

This should be everyone's motto. This is my message to you too: "keep evolving." If you follow this advice, there would be no doubt about the possibility that you will evolve to the level, not only of "superman" but also to the "superhuman" level.

Today, man has begun to recognize his latent potentialities. Modern man has even become a kind of "superman" through his technological skills. Now he looks forward with confidence to the day he would be in control of the universe, though to be really in control one has to be in control of oneself. Therefore, "superman," at least technologically, is not a dream to him any more; it is to him a possible reality. At least modern man is able to appreciate the importance of becoming "superman" and is confident enough to try.

Therefore, let me repeat: keep evolving by practicing religion in the non-dogmatic universal way. Keep evolving to solve your problems. Keep evolving to become "supermen," and even reach the "superhuman" level.

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## References

- [\*The Complete Book of Buddha's Lists -- Explained\*](#). David N. Snyder, Ph.D., 2006.
- <http://www.thedhamma.com/>

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